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Join UNH's Karen Von Damm on Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea

New Web Site Tracks the Adventure

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January 15, 2002

DURHAM, N.H. -- While 23 scientists, engineers and students venture into the ocean's depth during a National Science Foundation-sponsored expedition beneath the tropical waters of the eastern Pacific Ocean, the public will be able to track their progress and the discoveries of the crew.

Weekly updates from the expedition will be posted to the Web site for the University of New Hampshire's Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space (EOS) at <http://divediscover.sr.unh.edu>.

Karen Von Damm, professor in UNH's Complex Systems Research Center and professor of Earth Sciences, is the principal investigator for the voyage. The research team also includes investigators from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the University of Minnesota, Portland State University, University of Washington, Yale University and others.

For one month, from Jan. 6 to Feb. 10, the crew is living aboard the U.S. academic fleet research vessel Atlantis, the "mother ship" for the Alvin submersible. Their explorations will take them down to an undersea mountain range, formed by the gradual spreading apart of the Pacific Plate from the Cocos Plate, and comprised of many active volcanoes erupting lava that forms new ocean floor.

The scientists are studying both the volcanic ridge and the creatures that live deep in the ocean, such as tubeworms that can grow to three meters in length.

Twenty-five deep-sea dives with Alvin are dedicated to this mission, providing a unique opportunity to understand "black smoker" hot springs and other underwater systems. Alvin will bring the scientists down to the sea floor, nearly two miles beneath the water's surface. These deep-sea explorations are rare due to the extreme challenges of bringing people and machines down far beneath the sea surface.

"How fast things happen in the deep ocean remains a great unknown," Von Damm explains. "Over the last decade, scientists have learned that changes that people thought took hundreds of years to occur take just a few years. Going back to the first site where black smokers were discovered more than 20 years later, we hope to learn more about how long these systems last, and how they change. We will also be going to another site where we know of a volcanic eruption that took place approximately ten years ago, so we will be looking at what that site is like now."

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